

FLOSS IN ACTION

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FLOSS is about the community. FLOSS is software that is developed by communities of like-minded programmers and users. It is software that is localized, supported and promoted through a range of community-oriented organizations and user groups. The benefits extend to a wide range of users and organizations: school learners, small and medium enterprises, large businesses, health care services, private individuals, in fact anyone who has need of information and knowledge services.

Free access to and availability of floss means that anyone can benefit from computing, the ability to learn the IT trade and earn a living, and the ability to reach a whole new world through the internet.

MANY PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS AND BUSINESSES ARE ALREADY USING FLOSS TO THEIR OWN AND OTHERS' BENEFIT.

SPREADING THE BENEFITS OF FLOSS

The Shuttleworth Foundation's open source programme aims to accelerate the adoption of FLOSS by making free software accessible to all users, promoting an understanding of the benefits of FLOSS and providing avenues for users to access and experiment with FLOSS (www.tsf.org.za).

FOSSFA, the Free Software and Open Source Foundation for Africa is a multi-country organization which promotes the adoption and use of FLOSS throughout Africa. FOSSFA brings together a consortium of partners in education, health and governments to work towards the achievement of ICT objectives in Africa using FLOSS. FOSSFA's secretariat is based in the Meraka Institute, a national research centre managed by the CSIR. The 53 member states of the Committee on Development Information (CODI), a unit of the Economic Commission for Africa, has endorsed FOSSFA (fossfa.net).

Linuxchix Africa (<http://africalinuxchix.org/>) is the African chapter of the international community of women who use Linux (www.linuxchix.org). The global organization was founded in order to provide a supportive environment for women linux users and developers. Its membership includes novices and experienced users, amateur as well as professional programmers, system administrators and technical writers. Linuxchix consists of various women's development groups specific to Linux and FOSS related projects. They also offer channels of support and mentoring for women at all levels of competency in the Free Software/Open Source community.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Capacity building in the ICT sector is another area where the use of FLOSS can play an important role. Familiarity breeds resistance to change, even for users who are not too satisfied with the current offering (i.e. "better the devil you know..."). Newcomers to computers, particularly students and youth, are likely to be more receptive to a different, open model. Furthermore, because the source code is available, the FLOSS desktop can be customized freely to suit local needs. An obvious candidate is support for local languages. This alone makes a compelling case for the FLOSS desktop in South Africa.

Government, industry and society all have a key role to play in stimulating awareness and optimization of the benefits of FLOSS for South Africa and the region. Much is being done through schools, community centres, training CDs, and new ways are being found to respond to training needs.

MIGRATING TO FLOSS

FLOSS has come of age – high-quality FLOSS exists for almost any need. However, migration to FLOSS is challenging for organizations entrenched in the proprietary model.

Many users are currently running popular proprietary software on their computers. For these users, high-quality FLOSS applications after alternatives to proprietary software such as web browsers, office suites and graphics manipulation programs.

Although running FLOSS applications on a proprietary platform has many advantages, the ultimate goal is to run them on an open source platform.

In general, a phased approach is recommended with variations appropriate for your organization. On the desktop start with common FLOSS applications which run on your current platform, such as Firefox, Open Office and The Gimp. On the server side, start with a distribution of GNU/Linux such as Ubuntu/Debian, RedHat, Mandrive or SUSE Linux (see www.distrowatch.com). These include server-side software such as a web server (e.g. the Apache server), print servers (e.g. CUPS), e-mail, database management systems (e.g. MySQL, PostgreSQL, etc). Over time replace application components with FLOSS according to needs. Above all, consider the people involved and affected by this process – change management is the key to success.



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SOFTWARE FREEDOM

Software Freedom Day (SFD) is an annual worldwide celebration of Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS). SFD is a public education effort, not only to celebrate the virtues of Free and Open Source Software, but also to encourage its use, to the benefit of the public.

SFD was established in 2004 and was first observed on August 28, 2004 when over 70 teams participated. Since that time it has grown in popularity as more than 300 teams from over 60 countries celebrated on the second SFD, held on September 10, 2005. The primary sponsor for 2005-2006 is Canonical Ltd, the company behind the Ubuntu, a Linux distribution.

From 2006 onwards, it has been decided that Software Freedom Day will be held on the third Saturday of each September.

WHAT IS FLOSS?

FLOSS stands for "Free/Libre and Open Source Software". "Free software" has an ethical foundation (see gnu.org), while "open source software" (see opensource.org) emphasizes a practical approach to software development and sound services-based business models.

FLOSS refers to computer software and the availability of its source code under a licence which allows one to study, change and improve its design. Software developers may want to publish their software with a free or open source software licence, so that anybody may also develop the same software or understand how it works. FLOSS generally allows anybody to make a new custom version of the software, port it to new operating systems and processor architectures, share it with others or market it. The aim of FLOSS is to make the produce more understandable, modifiable, or simply accessibly and easy to share for community benefit.

FLOSS presents a philosophy, and by definition further defines boundaries on the usage, modification and redistribution of the software. FLOSS licences grant rights to users which would otherwise be prohibited by copyright. These include rights on usage, modification and redistribution. Several open source software licenses have qualified within the boundary of the Open Source Definition. While FLOSS presents a way to make the sources of a product publicly accessible, the licences allow the authors to fine tune such access (and many qualify as "free" or "libre" –see gnu.org/licenses/licenses.html).

FLOSS originally started in the 1960s when IBM and other companies started selling computers on a large scale. The computers came with software that was allowed to be modified. In the 1970s and 1980s some companies realized that there was a lot of money to be made by selling software separately from hardware. The business model was lucrative because software only needs to be created once, and can then be replicated an infinite number of times at almost no cost. The result was that most software became closed source or proprietary, and companies charged a purchase price and licence fees for each copy.

In 1985 the Free Software Foundation was founded, and in 1988 the term "open source software" was coined. Since then FLOSS projects have been attracting a great many new developers and users, and new projects are started almost daily. Today there are thousands of FLOSS utilities programs and applications, and over 1,000 GNU/Linux distributions available.

Many FLOSS projects are started from scratch by people who have identified a need for a particular piece of software. Others were once proprietary programs that have been released so that they can be developed, improved and shared as FLOSS.

WHY USE FLOSS?

Billions are spent each year on licence fees for proprietary software for government, education, business and other uses. Not only does the money go out of the country, but it is money that could be used to address other development needs. Is it necessary to pay the high price for proprietary software? The answer is that there are thousands of FLOSS programs available today which provide alternatives for almost all software available in the proprietary world.

Just two or three years ago, few people had heard the terms "open source software" and "free software". Those who had heard it incorrectly believed it to be the sole domain of programmers and technical people. Today this has changed. South Africa is amongst the world's most progressive nations when it comes to the use of open source software. The true value of open source software is being felt through numerous projects on the continent where FLOSS is being used to provide affordable community access points, build new business initiatives and develop computer literacy. FLOSS is arguably one of the best examples of open, collaborative, internationally distributed production and development that exists today, and has generated tremendous interest around the world from government, policy, business, academic research and developer communities.

In some schools learners are already experiencing the benefits of FLOSS through projects run by organizations such as the Shuttleworth Foundation's tuXlabs project, NetDay's computer laboratories programme and SchoolNet Namibia.

Projects such as translate.org.za are aiming to translate the most widely used FLOSS into all the national languages of South Africa and other languages on the continent. Being able to enter the digital networked information society in one's preferred language is crucial to increasing the effective use of ICTs.

EXAMPLES OF FLOSS

THOUSANDS OF OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE PROGRAMS ARE AVAILABLE TODAY. EXAMPLES OF SOME OF THE MORE WIDELY USED PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

GNU/Linux – an open source operating system. There are different distributions of GNU/Linux such as Ubuntu, Fedora Core, Mandriva, OpenSUSE, and Debian (www.distrowatch.com).



Open Office – a full suite of office productivity applications for word processing, presentations, spreadsheets, etc. (openoffice.org).



Firefox – a web browser with a rapidly growing user base. It offers users secure standards-compliant Internet use with many features that are not available in any other web browser (www.mozilla.com/firefox/central).



ThunderBird – a popular e-mail program which offers full e-mail functionality plus many other functions such as spam filters (www.mozilla.com/thunderbird).



Evolution – a fully featured open source groupware application including a powerful and flexible e-mail client.

Moodle – a course management system (CMS). This is a FLOSS software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities.

MySQL and PostgreSQL (for databases) – a very wide range of tools for specific fields including astronomy, bioinformatics, life sciences, earth sciences, nanotechnology, etc. (www.openscience.org/links).

WHERE TO GET FLOSS AND OPEN SOURCE LEARNING RESOURCES

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Or send an email to Sierra eRiders' mailing list below:

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